

“Happy Birthday, Comrade Martin!”

The 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth and the challenge to state authority in the German Democratic Republic¹

Stephen G. Brown

This is a pre-print of the following chapter: Stephen G. Brown, “‘Happy Birthday, Comrade Martin!’ The 500th Anniversary of Luther’s Birth and the Challenge to State Authority in the German Democratic Republic,” published in *Ecumenical Perspectives Five Hundred Years After Luther’s Reformation*, edited by Gerard Mannion, Dennis M. Doyle, and Theodore G. Dedon, 2021, Palgrave Macmillan, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

The final authenticated version is available online at:

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68360-3_4.

“Jahrestage haben nun einmal für die Entwicklung der Geschichtswissenschaft ihr Gutes.”²

An outside observer visiting the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1983 could have been forgiven for thinking that it was not Karl Marx, but Martin Luther, who provided the underpinning of the “first socialist state on German soil.” Signs of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth were everywhere: the *Altes Museum* in Berlin was displaying a major exhibition on *Kunst der Reformationszeit*; articles about Martin Luther could be found not only in church publications but in journals such as the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* and the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* that were part of the official academic discourse in the GDR, literary journals such as *Sinn und Form, neue deutsche literature*, or the *Weimarer Beiträge*, and even in *Einheit*, the theoretical journal of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). There was a television biopic series on Luther and a new biography of the Reformer by the Marxist historian Gerhard Brendler, while in Meiningen, a former ducal residence in the south of the GDR, the *Stadttheater* was staging the play *Die*

¹ “Happy Birthday, Comrade Martin.” was the title of a CTVC production broadcast on Channel 4 in 1983 on the churches in the German Democratic Republic.

² “Anniversaries have their good side when it comes to the development of historical research.” Horst Bartel and Walter Schmidt, “Das historisch-materialistische Lutherbild in Geschichte und Gegenwart,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 32:4 (1984), 298.

Wiedertäufer (The Anabaptists) by the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, which warns, as it happens, of the dangers of ideological partisans seizing power and using the state apparatus to repress all opposition.

The GDR's official Martin Luther Committee was presided by GDR leader Erich Honecker, general secretary of the SED and chairperson of the GDR State Council, and who, speaking at the first meeting of the committee in June 1980, described Luther as "one of the greatest sons of the German nation."³ The highlight of the state's Luther commemoration of 1983 was an official state ceremony on 9 November 1983 in East Berlin.

Certainly, the territories that after the Second World War made up the Soviet Zone of Occupation of Germany, and then, from 1949, the GDR, were the heartland of the Lutheran Reformation: Eisleben, where Luther was born and died; Erfurt, where he entered an Augustinian monastery; Wittenberg, where Luther promulgated his 95 Theses; Leipzig, where Luther engaged in debate with Johannes Eck; and Eisenach, where he took refuge on the Wartburg. This Reformation tradition extended into art and culture, for it was also here that artists and musicians such as Lucas Cranach the Elder and Johann Sebastian Bach lived and worked.

Yet despite the historical and cultural Reformation tradition in East Germany, the SED, which assumed power at the founding of the GDR in 1949, was deeply ambivalent about the legacy of Luther. Portrayed by Friedrich Engels as the lackey of the princes through his support for the suppression of the leaders of the Peasants' War, the GDR instead lifted up theologian Thomas Müntzer, executed in 1525 for his role as a leader of the rebels in the Peasants' War. Yet, now, according to the *Theses concerning Martin Luther*, published in 1981 by a working group of the GDR Academy of Sciences, the "progressive achievement of Luther has its firm place in the cultural tradition of the German Democratic Republic,"⁴ while Erich Honecker himself, in an unprecedented interview in 1983 with a West German church monthly, the *Lutherische Monatshefte*, described Luther as inspiring "revolutionary impulses that went far

³ Erich Honecker, "Unsere Zeit verlangt Parteinahme für Fortschritt, Vernunft und Menschlichkeit," in *Martin Luther und unsere Zeit* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), 11.

⁴ The Luther Quincentenary in the German Democratic Republic, *Theses concerning Martin Luther* (Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, n.d.), 34–36. According to the theses, it was the "victory of the working class" and the establishment of socialism in the GDR that had "created the necessary conditions for a fair and reasoned assessment of the importance of Luther." On the development of the theses see Hartmut Lehmann, "Zur Entstehung der 15 Thesen über Martin Luther im Jahre 1983," in *Protestantisches Christentum im Prozess der Säkularisierung* ed. Hartmut Lehmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 127–158

beyond the German states of those days . . . When he stood before the Imperial Diet of Worms . . . [he] followed his conscience rather than the official doctrines.”⁵ While the historical assessment of Luther in the GDR was by no means as monolithic as is sometimes assumed,⁶ such statements, together with the high-profile role of the SED’s general secretary, marked a new tone and a re-evaluation of the place of Luther in German history in general, and in the history of the GDR specifically.

This paper explores how the attempt of the GDR and the SED to use the Luther anniversary to re-appropriate motifs in German history it had previously spurned and to incorporate the GDR’s Protestant churches into the strengthening of the socialist state, instead led to the reinforcement of the self-confidence of the Protestant churches, and the ultimate failure of the official attempt to construct a new national narrative for the GDR that would strengthen the identification of citizens with the state in which they lived. As such, the Luther commemoration of 1983 was a contested commemoration in which the ambitions placed on it failed to materialize. The consequences of this failure would be seen in the growth of disaffection and dissent within the Protestant churches and beyond, and which became manifest in the “peaceful revolution” of 1989.

The Luther Commemoration and Church–State Relationships in the GDR

First, the 1983 Luther anniversary needs to be seen against the background of the changing relationship between church and state in the GDR, unique among Eastern Europe states in having a predominantly Protestant religious tradition. From the founding of the GDR in 1949 to its collapse four decades later, state policy toward the Protestant churches wavered from outright repression in the 1950s to cautious collaboration in the 1970s and early 1980s. Christians in the GDR faced discrimination and disadvantages, not least in access to higher education, but even during the most repressive periods of state action, the eight regional Protestant churches on the territory of the GDR were able to maintain their institutional and

⁵ “Interview Erich Honeckers mit der BRD-Zeitschrift ‘Lutherische Monatshefte’: DDR-Lutherehrung Manifestation der Humanität und des Friedens,” *Neues Deutschland*, 6 October 1983, 3.

⁶ Peter Maser has described the changes in the portray of Luther in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and then the GDR from 1946 to 1983, with Luther portrayed as a “Fighter for Germany and its Unity,” for example, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of his death in 1946. See “Die Entwicklung des marxistischen Lutherbildes,” Chapter 3, Peter Maser, *“Mit Luther alles in Butter?” Das Lutherjahr 1983 im Spiegel ausgewählter Akten* (Berlin: Metropol, 2013), 40.

organizational autonomy from the state, with their own decision-making synods and elected bishops. Nevertheless, from the end of the 1950s onwards, the state increasingly hindered contacts between the Protestant churches in the GDR and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the formal grouping of all Protestant regional churches in both West and East Germany. In 1969, the Protestant churches on the territory of the GDR formed their own Federation of Protestant Churches (*Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen (BEK)*), separate from the EKD, and the somewhat ambiguous statement by the Federation in the early 1970s that it saw itself as a “church within socialism” was interpreted by the state as a sign that the Protestant church was willing to accept a constructive, but subordinate, role within the GDR state structures.⁷ This coincided with the coming to power of Erich Honecker as SED general secretary and the policy of East–West détente that led to the international diplomatic recognition of the GDR and increased contacts between the two German states.

The foundation of the BEK opened the way for official contacts with the authorities, one of the results of which was a summit meeting on 6 March 1978 between leaders of the Federation of Protestant Churches and GDR leader Erich Honecker, the outcome of which took on the role of a *de-facto* constitutional settlement for the position of the Protestant churches in the GDR. Following this meeting, permission was given to build churches on new housing estates, the Protestant churches gained access to GDR radio and television, and were able to take an increasing role in international ecumenical affairs, one example of which was the permission given to the Federation to host a meeting of the central committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Dresden in 1981. Shortly before the WCC meeting, Klaus Gysi, the GDR’s state secretary for church affairs, in lectures in London and Geneva, described its policy towards the church as being a “great historic experiment.”⁸ While not spurning ideological competition, nor all discriminatory measures against Christians, the GDR sought to incorporate Protestantism into the strengthening of the state at home and abroad, and the Luther anniversary formed part of this policy, with Honecker promising support from the state for church activities in the year of the Luther jubilee in 1983, according to the report of the

⁷ On the history of the Protestant church describing itself as a “church within socialism,” see Stephen Brown, *Von der Unzufriedenheit zum Widerspruch* trans. Franck Kürschner-Pelkmann (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2010, 48–53.

⁸ Klaus Gysi, “Kirche und Staat in der DDR: Vorträge in London und Genf,” *epd-Dokumentation* 28/81, 8

1978 church–state meeting published in the official party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*.⁹ Furthermore, according to the record of the church–state meeting circulated to the SED politburo eight days later on 14 March 1978, Honecker went further than the press report suggested, stating that:

The German Democratic Republic sees itself as the inheritor of all that is progressive and humanist in the history of our nation (*Volk*). The Luther jubilee in 1983 will be prepared in good time through a state commission. It would be appropriate to coordinate the state and church efforts for the Luther jubilee. As far as the renovation of the Luther memorial sites in Wittenberg, Eisleben, Eisenach, and Erfurt are concerned, the state organs already have instructions for the appropriate reconstruction of these sites.¹⁰

The significance of this statement for the SED's historical and ideological understanding of Luther will be discussed below, but what is striking is the intimate connection between the reorientation of church–state relations symbolized by the meeting of 6 March 1978, and the official celebration of the Luther anniversary by the state. The commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967 was marked by controversy between state and church: GDR church representatives left the state committee after the GDR had refused visas to representatives from the EKD in the West.¹¹ The organization of the 1983 Luther anniversary, on the other hand, after difficult negotiations, was finally organized in a way that recognized the autonomous but circumscribed role of the Protestant churches in the GDR, with two separate Luther committees, one under the patronage of the state, and the other under the auspices of the church, but cooperating with each other, and four church observers attending – but not officially members of – the state committee.¹² Honecker's announcement of an official

⁹ See the report of the meeting published in the official SED newspaper: "Konstruktives, freimütiges Gespräch beim Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates," *Neues Deutschland*, 7 March 1988.

¹⁰ "Bericht über das Gespräch des Generalsekretärs des ZK der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR, Genossen Erich Honecker, mit dem Vorstand der Konferenz der Evangelischen Kirchenleitungen in der DDR am 6. März 1978," Document 62 in *SED und Kirche. Eine Dokumentation ihrer Beziehungen*, vol. 2: SED 1968-1989, ed. Frederic Hartwig and Horst Dohle (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1995) 336.

¹¹ Jan Scheunemann, "Das Luther-Jubiläum 1983 in der DDR als gesamtdeutsches Ereignis," in *Asymmetrisch verflochten?: Neue Forschungen zur gesamtdeutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* ed. Detlev Brunner, Udo Grashoff, Andreas Kötzing (Berlin: Links-Verlag, 2013), 43.

¹² Horst Döhle, a senior official under the GDR's state secretary for church affairs, has described the complicated negotiations between church and state that led to the agreement for two parallel committees; see Horst Dohle, "Die Luther-Ehrung und die Kirchenpolitik der DDR," in *Luther und die DDR* ed. Horst Dähn and Joachim Heise (Berlin: edition Ost, 1996), 55–60.

state commemoration meant that the Protestant churches also had to adjust their perspectives for the Luther anniversary in 1983. The church committee that had been preparing for the jubilee since 1975 had until then been envisaging a rather low-key commemoration, centred on parish seminars, regional events, and study days.¹³ The Protestant churches now began actively preparing their own large-scale events for 1983.

Shunned diplomatically outside the Soviet bloc until the early 1970s, the Luther anniversary promised to raise the GDR's profile internationally, and, quite apart from the interest in hard currency earnings from tourists, buttress the legitimacy of the GDR through the participation of international statespersons. The SED planned to invite not only senior West German politicians – including the federal president and the chancellor – to the official state ceremony in East Berlin, but also the crowned heads of the Nordic Lutheran states. At the same time, there was a clear attempt by the SED to appropriate the figure of Martin Luther for the purposes of the GDR and not leave it to West Germany alone to commemorate Luther, and in doing so to promote an “all-German” celebration of German history and culture.¹⁴

The Shift in the Official Historical Understanding of Martin Luther

Beyond the pragmatic objectives of incorporating the Protestant churches into the SED-governed GDR society, and raising the international prestige of the GDR, the Luther anniversary also marked a re-evaluation of the person and role of Martin Luther within the traditions of the German Democratic Republic. In his report to the SED politburo on 14 March 1978, Honecker had referred not only to the creation of an official state commission to prepare for the Luther anniversary and plans for the renovation of historic Luther monuments and memorial sites, but also made the sweeping claim that the GDR was “the inheritor of all that is progressive *and humanist* in the history of our nation (*Volk*)” (emphasis added), a claim that he repeated in his New Year greetings to his subjects at the end of 1978.¹⁵ Honecker was not simply announcing the creation of an official state commission to prepare for the anniversary,

¹³ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 59–60.

¹⁴ Scheunemann, “Das Luther-Jubiläum,” 38.

¹⁵ In this address, Honecker stated that the GDR was the “inheritor of all that is progressive and humanist in the history of the German nation.” Erich Honecker, “Allen Bürgern unsere Republik ein erfolgreiches und gesundes neues Jahr,” *Neues Deutschland*, 30–31 December 1978, 1; *Neues Deutschland Online-Archiv*: <http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ddr-presse/ergebnisanzeige/?purl=SNP2532889X-19781230-0-1-9-0>.

but making the ideological claim that Luther belonged not only to so-called bourgeois history, nor to church history, but to the history of the GDR itself as a whole. This re-evaluation of the life and work of Luther coincided with the re-evaluation more generally by GDR historians of the relationship between Germany's cultural and historical "legacy" and the historical "traditions" of the GDR, seen for example also in a new interest in the historical legacy of Prussia.

It was Erich Honecker himself who officially set out this new approach to Luther in his opening address as chairperson of the official Martin Luther Committee at its founding meeting on 13 June 1980 in Berlin. Luther, he said, was "one of the greatest sons of the German people" and the GDR and its citizens paid tribute to "the historical achievement that he accomplished for social progress and world culture through setting in motion the Reformation, which represented a middle-class [*bürgerliche*] revolution." Luther was one of the most important humanists, striving for a more just world, Honecker continued, and "among the progressive traditions that we cultivate and continue is the work and the legacy of all those who have contributed to progress, the development of world culture, irrespective of the social and class-related bonds in which they found themselves."¹⁶ Though it was the tragedy of Luther that he failed to appreciate the importance of the Peasants' War, even after its "brutal suppression," Luther continued his tough and tenacious work for the Reformation. Honecker referred to the "many references" by Marx and Engels to the progressive historical achievement of Luther and the Reformation, while Lenin, like Engels before him, counted the Reformation and the Peasants' War as among the "greatest revolutions of the previous era." Honecker ended his address by stating that the commemoration of the person and work of Martin Luther reflected the cooperation of all citizens of the GDR, irrespective of their world view or religion, and a policy aiming at the wellbeing of the people, as practised in the GDR, "corresponds at the same time to a basic Christian concern."¹⁷

In early 1978, however, at the time that Honecker first presented the results of his meeting with church leaders to the SED politburo, there did not yet exist "any adequate ideological justification for such a fundamental reformulation of the Marxist historical understanding

¹⁶ Erich Honecker, "Unsere Zeit verlangt Parteinahme für Fortschritt, Vernunft und Menschlichkeit," in *Martin Luther und unsere Zeit* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), 11–12.

¹⁷ Honecker, "Unsere Zeit," 14–17.

[*Geschichtsbild*] concerning Martin Luther and the Reformation.”¹⁸ Here, the SED was reliant on the historians of the GDR, and specifically the relatively small group of historians dealing with the Reformation period. In November 1978, a working group for the “coordination of the academic [*wissenschaftliche*] preparatory work for the Luther jubilee” was set up at the GDR Academy of Sciences¹⁹ Its president was Horst Bartel, the director of the academy’s Central Institute for History, its secretary Gerhard Brendler, who would become the author of the GDR Luther biography, while its members included Max Steinmetz, the “father” of Reformation research in the GDR. It was this group that would develop the *Theses concerning Martin Luther* published in 1981. These theses set out the historical and understanding of Luther in the GDR, and were of central importance for the Luther commemoration, setting out as they did the official political and ideological guidelines that the Luther activities should follow:²⁰

On the one hand, [the authors] carefully protected themselves: in both the first and the last thesis, they make a point of quoting Erich Honecker, and in several places Friedrich Engels. On the other hand, however, it is noticeable that Luther’s theology in the theses is no longer seen as merely a reflection of socio-economic processes, but there is the development of a certain understanding that faith and religion had an existential significance for the people of the 16th century. This revision of older Marxist positions is often referred to by them as the new insights of Marxist research on Luther.²¹

Gerhard Brendler has noted, however, that unlike similar documents drawn up for other official occasions in the GDR, the Martin Luther theses were never published as “official theses” of the SED central committee, but rather as the theses of a group of academics: this meant, on the one hand, that rejecting the theses did not bring one into conflict with the central committee, nor did support for the theses equate with support for Marxism-Leninism or the leading role of the SED.²² The fact they were not the “official theses” of the central committee, might also indicate some reticence within the leading organs of the SED about adopting Luther as an exemplar for socialism.

¹⁸ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 77.

¹⁹ For the work of this committee see Lehmann, “Zur Entstehung der 15 Theses,” 128–131.

²⁰ Lehmann, “Zur Entstehung der 15 Theses,” 140.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157

²² Letter by Gerhard Brendler to Theo Lehmann, 26.2.2000, cited in *ibid.*, 144, note 10.

In an article published in 1984,²³ Horst Bartel and Walter Schmidt, the director of the Institute for the German Labour Movement of the Academy of Sciences, traced the beginnings of the re-evaluation of Luther from the time of the 1967 Reformation commemoration, a process that intensified from the mid-1970s, before receiving a particular impetus from the 1983 Luther anniversary itself. The two Marxist historians noted in particular the intensive treatment consecrated for the first time to Luther as a *theologian* and the direct role of theology as a factor for social change, not just as a reflection of social forces; the need to transcend the relatively undifferentiated, often moralistic rejection of Luther's position on the Peasants' War to take account of his theological motivation; and Luther's influence on society as a whole – in areas such as music, culture, art, economic thought, education, and especially his social and work ethic: “By taking into account the breath, extent, and diversity of Luther's activity, the image of Luther itself becomes more colourful, more precise, and – more positive.”²⁴ One of the longest-lasting legacies of the plans for the 1983 commemoration was the institution of a series of expert discussions about the Reformation between Marxist historians and theologians and church historians. Until then it would have been unthinkable that Marxist historians of the Reformation would meet their Christian colleagues for an official exchange of opinions.²⁵ Only the end of the GDR in 1990 brought close to these discussions, notable for the fact that they took place in church premises, rather than on neutral territory.²⁶

Alongside this discussion of the re-evaluation of Martin Luther, Bartel and Schmidt point to the wider re-evaluation of historical “tradition” and “legacy” (*Erbe*) taking place in GDR historiography at this time, no longer focusing solely or mainly on revolutionary events and processes, but to opening up the whole range of historical traditions including those of the “ruling and exploitative classes” that could contribute to the intellectual life of the “developing socialist German nation.”²⁷ As Georg Iggers has pointed out in his discussion of Marxist historiography, on the one hand the GDR “represented a socialist German nation; on the other

²³ Horst Bartel & Walter Schmidt, “Das historisch-materialistische Lutherbild in Geschichte und Gegenwart,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 32:4 (1984), 291-301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁵ Dohle, “Die Luther-Ehrung und die Kirchenpolitik der DDR,” 69.

²⁶ For an account of these discussions see Joachim Heise and Christa Stache, eds, *Dialog über Luther und Müntzer: Zwanzig Expertengespräche zwischen kirchlichen und marxistischen Reformationshistorikern der DDR (1981 - 1990); eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Evangelisches. Zentralarchiv, 2011).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 298-99.

hand the party claimed the entire German past as the ‘heritage’ (*Erbe*) of the socialist nation.”²⁸ While the “heritage” that constituted German history as a whole was distinguished from the positive “tradition” on which the GDR could build its sense of national identity, the basis for the legitimacy of the socialist nation was much wider than simply the “progressive” tradition it had claimed up until then. Historians now had to transcend the previous schematic division between “progressive” and “reactionary” traditions, while the concept of “tradition” now included not only the previous socialist heroic figures from Thomas Müntzer onwards, but all those who created the possibility of a socialist German state, leading to a reassessment not only of Martin Luther, but also Frederick II, Otto von Bismarck, and the history of Prussia itself,²⁹ symbolized by restoration in 1980 of the statute of Frederick the Great to its original place on the Unter den Linden in East Berlin.

The Luther biography by Gerhard Brendler is a case in point.³⁰ Published in 1983, the year of the Luther anniversary, its subtitle – “Theology and Revolution” – underlines the role of theology in understanding the Reformer, while its concluding paragraphs portray even Luther’s alliance with the princes as playing an objectively progressive role:

After the failure of the Peasants’ War, Luther’s historical function consisted of defending ideologically the middle-class moderate Reformation and its alliance with the princes. Thus the chasm between Luther and the popular movement became wider, and his dependence on the German princes increased. *However, Luther’s amicable relationship with the German princes provided for the erection of a barrier against a complete re-Catholicizing of Germany, for the basis of further development of the Reformation in Europe, and therefore for new thrusts in the middle-class struggle for emancipation.* Martin Luther, [though] fettered by the inconsistencies of his age, was an activating agent [the

²⁸ Georg G. Iggers, “Where Did Historical Studies in the German Democratic Republic Stand at the Eve of Unification?” in *East German Historians since Reunification: A Discipline Transformed* ed. Axel Fair-Schulz and Mario Kessler (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2017), 36.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theologie und Revolution* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1983); English translation: *Martin Luther. Theology and Revolution* trans. Claude R. Foster, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

German text has “*progressiver Akteur*”] in the process of the early middle-class revolution.³¹

“The young Luther was a rebel in a monk’s cowl,” wrote Brendler. “However, circumstances had so changed that, although the rhetoric for the most part had remained the same, its social function had changed.”³² In his Luther biography, Brendler also appeared to draw a parallel between the situation facing Luther, a rebellious monk who with the course of the revolution he unleashed became an objective ally of the German princes, and that facing the GDR, whose beginnings were rooted in revolutionary fervour but which was now an established state with an entrenched ruling party: “The more the Reformation became consolidated, the more it became a force for order that was obliged to cooperate with other systems of order.”³³ Possibly the challenge now facing the SED was similar to that facing the older Luther: “In contrast to the youth who believed they correctly represented a doctrine when they studiously repeated unaltered its fundamental premises and seminal ideas, Luther had learned long ago to regard its own teaching within that context determined by the specific historical circumstances. Luther would not permit himself to be defeated by his own past, but he also would not deny what he had once promulgated.”³⁴

Writing in the mid-1990s, after the end of the GDR, Brendler was more explicit about the reassessment of the place of Martin Luther and the German historical legacy more generally in the traditions of the GDR. Immediately after the Second World War, he writes, the SED attempted “to recall the revolutionary events and figures of German history so as to develop a democratic and revolutionary tradition.”³⁵ By the 1980s, however, this “by now customary understanding of tradition, rooted in the instinct for class struggle of the communists, did not have the power to integrate the proclaimed ‘socialist human community,’ or the supposedly ‘socialist nation,’ and to create or at least serve as a comprehensive sense of identity.”³⁶ Everyone knew, Brendler continued, that society was not only made up of born antifascists, still less communists, atheists or Marxists. If the GDR wanted to become a “nation state” in its

³¹ Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther*, 376 (English translation), 445 (German edition).

³² *Ibid.*, 330 (English translation), 389 (German edition), emphasis added.

³³ *Ibid.*, 335 (English translation), 394 (German edition).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 356 (English translation), 430 (German edition).

³⁵ Gerhard Brendler, “Luther im Traditionskonflikt der DDR,” in *Luther und die DDR* ed. Horst Dähn & Joachim Heise (Berlin: edition Ost, 1996), 21-52, here 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

own right, then it needed to develop its own “iconography,” from its own territory, through figures such as Luther, Friedrich II, or Bismarck.

The Martin Luther Anniversary as a Contested Commemoration

The GDR’s commemoration of Martin Luther never quite lived up to the ambitions that had been set for it, despite the programme to honour the Reformer’s achievements. This was in part due to the tense international situation in which the 1983 anniversary took place, following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the NATO twin-track decision shortly before this to deploy medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe as a response to Soviet SS-20 missiles, and the announced “counter measures” by the Warsaw Pact. Despite a large-scale peace movement in the Federal Republic, seen in a mass demonstration in Bonn on 22 October 1983, the Bundestag ratified the deployment of these missiles on 22 November 1983, less than two weeks after the Luther anniversary, increasing tension between the two German states. In the GDR itself, church–state relationships were increasingly troubled by a growing autonomous peace movement within Protestant churches, using as a slogan the Old Testament vision of “Swords into Ploughshares.” Neither church–state relationships nor those between the two German states were propitious for the Luther commemoration. Honecker’s ambitious aim had been to welcome most of the heads of state in the GDR for the Luther commemoration.³⁷ However, the Federal German president and chancellor declined the invitation to the official state ceremony on 9 November 1983,³⁸ as did the crowned heads of the Nordic Lutheran nations. Given this, the state ceremony itself became a distinctly subdued occasion. Instead of being given by Honecker in his capacity as chairperson of the Martin Luther Committee,³⁹ the main address was left to one of his deputies, Gerald Götting, chairperson of the Christian Democratic Union, one of the “bloc parties” represented in the GDR parliament but following the lead of the SED. The fact that Götting, and not Honecker, gave the main address suggested that an enhancement of church–state relations could not be

³⁷ Dohle, “Die Luther-Ehrung und die Kirchenpolitik der DDR,” 79.

³⁸ Scheunemann, “Luther-Jubiläum,” 37.

³⁹ Honecker gave a separate address as a reception during the state ceremony for the church representatives attending the Luther commemoration, see Erich Honecker, “Im Ringen um Frieden dem Erbe Luthers verbunden: Toast von Erich Honecker, Vorsitzender des Staatsrates der DDR und Vorsitzender des Martin-Luther-Komitees der DDR auf dem Festempfang,” *Neues Deutschland*, 10 November 1983.

expected, given the somewhat ambiguous relationship of the GDR Protestant churches with the CDU, which claimed to represent the interests of GDR Christians. Though spread over two pages of the official party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*,⁴⁰ Götting's address added little to the GDR's re-evaluation of the role of the Luther. If anything, it appeared to set limits once again to the GDR's appreciation of the great Reformer, instead holding up Thomas Müntzer as the "leader of the revolutionary sections of the people." With the Peasants' War, Götting stated, the point was reached where, alongside the greatness of Martin Luther, "his limitations and the class-bound limits of his historical position and achievement became apparent." Moreover, Götting's address took on a something of a polemical tone when it claimed Martin Luther's work ethic as the basis for the socialist labour morale in the GDR, and stated that "according to Luther, the pursuit of peace is also served by the so-called 'divine service of the Sword,' that is to say armed readiness for defence," a riposte to those in the church calling for swords to be beaten into ploughshares.

While the state commemoration of Luther was at most a limited success, the church events to mark the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth brought 200 international ecumenical guests to the GDR, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie; Cardinal Johannes Willebrands of the Roman Catholic Church; the general secretaries of the World Council of Churches, Philip Potter, and of the Lutheran World Federation, Carl Mau; Bishop K. H. Ting from the People's Republic of China; Bishop Eduard Lohse of the Evangelical Church in Germany; and Metropolitan Filaret of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴¹ The church's Luther commemoration marked an ecumenical milestone in at least two respects: Cardinal Willebrand's reflections on Martin Luther⁴² served as a contribution to the process of the Roman Catholic re-evaluation of Martin Luther that would culminate in the joint Catholic-Lutheran commemoration of the Reformation in Lund in 2016, and the impetus the Luther commemoration gave to the Archbishop of Canterbury to set in train the discussions that would lead to the Meissen agreement between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in

⁴⁰ Gerald Götting, "In gemeinsamer Aktion für die Bewahrung des Lebens: Festansprache von Gerald Götting, Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR und Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Martin-Luther-Komitees der DDR auf dem Festakt," *Neues Deutschland*, 10 October 1983, 3–4; <http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ddr-presse/ergebnisanzeige/?purl=SNP2532889X-19831110-0-3-30-0>

⁴¹ For the texts of the church commemoration of Luther, see Helmut Zeddies and Rolf-Dieter Günther, eds, *Gott über all Dinge: Begegnungen mit Martin Luther* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1984).

⁴² Johannes Kardinal Willebrands, "Martin Luther 1483–1983," in *ibid.*, 99–104; English translation: *Information Service of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity* 52:3 (1983), 92–94; see John A. Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 72–74.

Germany.⁴³ In so doing, the Luther commemoration strengthened the self-confidence of the GDR churches and consolidated their role in the international network of church relationships.

The subdued nature of the state's Luther commemoration was not simply the result of a tense international situation and difficulties between church and state in the GDR. The fundamental re-evaluation of the person and work of Luther that had been announced by Honecker with the promulgation of the official state commemoration met with some resistance from sections of the SED. As plans for a five-part television film portraying Luther were being elaborated, the then State Secretary for Church Affairs, Klaus Gysi, when asked at the end of August 1981, how the project would be perceived by the Protestants and Catholics in the GDR, issued a note of caution. The problem was not with the churches as such, for whom the film would create little difficulty – apart from the need to avoid alienating Catholics by portraying the Vatican in too negative a light – but the possible negative reactions from sections of the SED itself, because of the a perception about the apparent downgrading of Thomas Müntzer to the benefit of Luther. “A discussion within the party is unavoidable,” Gysi is recorded as saying.⁴⁴

Adolf Laube, a member of the working group of the Academy of Sciences charged with preparing the academic foundations for the Luther anniversary, has since confirmed that the positive re-evaluation of Luther was contested within the SED, recalling how the state commemoration of Luther had met fierce criticism within the GDR: “On many of our engagements in the GDR we encountered incomprehension and fierce criticism as to why the GDR was spending such time and effort honouring someone who was a church reformer and more than this had gone down in history as a lackey of the princes and as a butcher of the peasants. It simply went too far – and not only for SED functionaries and veterans of the party.”⁴⁵ Local and regional party functionaries dragged their feet or even blocked measures linked to the Luther commemoration, and sometimes only the intervention of the Martin Luther

⁴³ Christa Grengel, “Comments on the Meissen Process,” in *Die Entstehung der Meissener Erklärung: Berichte von drei Zeitzeugen / The Birth of the Meissen Agreement: Experiences of Three Contemporary Witnesses* ed. EKD Meissen Commission (Hanover: Evangelical Church in Germany, n.d.), 22, EKD website, https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/die_entstehung_der_meissener_erklaerung.pdf.

⁴⁴ See Rotraut Simons, “Das DDR-Fernsehen und die Luther-Ehrung,” in Dähn and Heise, eds, *Luther und die DDR*, 133, citing a memorandum of a discussion with Luther, in the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, archive file Drama Martin Luther Prod.

⁴⁵ “Interview mit Adolf Laube,” in *Dialog über Luther und Münzer* ed. Joachim Heise and Christa Stache (Berlin: Gesellschaft zur Förderung vergleichender Staat-Kirche-Forschung, 2011), 271–72.

Committee or threatening to take the matter to Erich Honecker could get things moving.⁴⁶ In March 1983, Gysi found himself having to remind GDR district officials that “it was not an accident that I told the meeting of representatives of the two Luther committees in Wittenberg on 17.2.1983 that the fruitful experience of working together now needed to be reflected in the experience of everyday life . . . Given various incidents I considered this to be necessary and I repeat it once again.”⁴⁷ The GDR’s education ministry under Margot Honecker – who was also Erich Honecker’s wife – resisted the new understanding of Luther being reflected in GDR text books,⁴⁸ while the grand old man, the “*nestor*,” of the GDR social sciences, the historian Jürgen Kuczynski, described the theses about Luther as being tantamount to a “hagiography.”⁴⁹ The SED attempted to counter some of the discontent by declaring 1983 as the Karl-Marx-Year to mark the 100th anniversary of his death, but the commemorations of the 19th-century political economist were overshadowed by that of Martin Luther.

Alongside the contested nature of the Luther commemoration within the SED, there was also the issue of the relationship between state and church. The Protestant churches had been preparing for the Luther anniversary since 1975, and particularly the idea of the International Conference for Luther Research being hosted in the GDR. As far as its own activities were concerned, the Federation of Protestant Churches planned to focus on parish and regional church events. The announcement by Erich Honecker at his meeting with church leaders in 1978 that the commemoration of Luther would be a major priority for the state as a whole meant that the church, like the SED, was confronted with the need for larger scale planning. Thus it planned seven regional *Kirchentage* in different parts of the GDR in the summer months of 1983 under the motto, “*Vertrauen wagen*” – “Dare to trust.” The highlight of the church activities was a commemoration in Luther’s birthplace of Eisleben on 10 November 1983, the anniversary of his birth, to be followed by a weekend of the “Days of Ecumenical Encounter” in neighbouring Leipzig to which high-ranking international church representatives were invited. For Honecker, it was clear that the Luther commemoration could be celebrated only *with* the churches and not *against* them. So he was willing to make significant concessions to

⁴⁶ Dohle, “Die Luther-Ehrung,” 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁸ See Hans-Jürgen Schreiber and Achim Leschinsky, “Luther vor der Revisionsinstanz. Der Konflikt um das Luther-Bild und der Einfluß der Historiker auf die Revision des DDR-Geschichtslehrplanes in den 80er Jahren,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 46:2 (March-April 2000), 275–294

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

ensure the support of the churches for the commemoration as a whole. Thus the state ceremony took place in East Berlin on 9 November 1983 instead of the actual anniversary of Luther's birth the following day, as originally planned, to allow the main church commemoration to take place on 10 November in Eisleben. For their part, the churches' Luther committee cooperated with its state counterpart in drawing up a joint list of dignitaries to be invited to the events in East Berlin and Eisleben. State invitees would also be entitled to attend the church events, while representatives from the churches were to be invited by the Federation of Protestant Churches, with the exception of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who found himself on the list of state invitees.⁵⁰

The Luther commemoration, however, took place at a difficult time for relations between state and church in the GDR. The deterioration in the international situation since the church–state summit of 6 March 1978 led to the Protestant churches in the GDR taking an ever more forceful position on issues of peace and war.⁵¹ The introduction of military education in GDR schools in 1978 was the catalyst for a church-based autonomous peace movement calling for the “demilitarization” of GDR society and the right for conscientious objectors to undertake social work instead of military service. From 1980, the Federation of Protestant Churches had organized an annual *Friedensdekade*, a ten-day GDR-wide autumn peace campaign for which the symbol was a depiction of a Soviet statute donated to the United Nations in New York portraying a sword being forged into a ploughshare. The officially tolerated status of the Protestant churches in the GDR offered parishes a certain freedom of manoeuvre for their activities, as long as they took place on church premises and could be seen as having a religious dimension. A youth-based subculture developed within Protestant churches and the growth of what became known as *Basisgruppen* (grassroots groups) around issues such as peace, ecology, and civic rights, often critical of state positions. In March 1982, Honecker warned the SED's district first party secretaries that “destructive” circles were seeking to undermine “the more or less good relationship of the Protestant churches to the state,” and of “certain forces in the church” using the “smoke screen of an ‘autonomous’ or ‘independent’ peace movement, acting

⁵⁰ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 306–7.

⁵¹ On the peace work of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR, see Anke Silomon, ‘Schwerter zu Pflugscharen’ und die DDR: die Friedensarbeit der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR im Rahmen der Friedensdekaden 1980 bis 1982 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

in the interests of imperialist circles, to organize oppositional forces.”⁵² In September 1983, the synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches denounced the “spirit, logic, and practice of deterrence.” More than this, the Saxony bishop, Johannes Hempel, the presiding bishop of the Federation, spoke of the “frustration” of GDR citizens due to the “centralism of our society,” problems in the way the state dealt with young people and their “right to be angry,” and confusing “honest critique” with “agitation against society.”⁵³ The SED politburo judged this intervention to be a provocation, and immediately reversed a decision, taken only seven days previously, that Erich Honecker should take part in the church’s Luther commemoration in Eisleben on 10 November 1983.⁵⁴

The seven regional *Kirchentage* marking the Luther commemorations often became forums for protest.⁵⁵ In Rostock, reported the Ministry for State Security, the Stasi, antagonistic and destructive forces (“*feindlich-destruktive Kräfte*”) attempted to coordinate their activities with groups in other parts of the GDR;⁵⁶ in Eisleben, the bishop of the Church Province of Saxony, Werner Krusche, stated that it was difficult to trust the state, which was increasingly distrustful of Christians, and urged people to make greater use of the possibilities open to them to challenge unjust decisions or actions.⁵⁷ In Frankfurt/Oder there were discussions about mobilizing women against the new law on military service which would see females being conscripted in times of emergency, and demands for unilateral disarmament by socialist states;⁵⁸ and in Dresden, there were calls for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the GDR.⁵⁹ Most dramatically in Wittenberg itself, in the courtyard of the *Lutherhaus*, the monastery where Luther once resided, a metalworker literally forged a sword into a ploughshare before a crowd of 300 people.⁶⁰ For state secretary Klaus Gysi, the Wittenberg Kirchentag represented a “breach of all the assurances given in the Luther year . . . and the worst Kirchentag of all.”⁶¹

⁵² Erich Honecker, “Fernschreiben an die 1. Sekretäre der Bezirks- und Kreisleitungen der SED,” 16.04.1982, cited in Brown, *Von der Unzufriedenheit*, 60.

⁵³ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 318.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ On the *Kirchentage* see Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 338–81; Dohle, “Die Luther-Ehrung,” 77–84.

⁵⁶ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 355.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁶⁰ On the Wittenberg *Kirchentag* see Annette Hildebrandt and Lothar Tautz, *Protestanten in Zeiten des Kalten Krieges: Der Wittenberger Kirchentag zum Lutherjubiläum 1983 in Fokus der Staatssicherheit* (Halle (Saale): Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2017).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 364–5.

Luther, now seen as a young rebel against a powerful ideological institution, following “his conscience rather than the official doctrines” (in the words of Erich Honecker in *Lutherische Monatshefte* quoted earlier), took on quite a different connotation from that of a forerunner of the emerging socialist German nation. Meanwhile, the new interest shown by the SED in the life and work of Luther also faced critique within church circles, such as by Edelbert Richter, the student pastor in Naumburg and co-founder of a peace group there, pointing to the use by the state of the conservative elements of Luther’s theology, such as the Lutheran work ethic, respect for authority, and sense of duty. “If official Marxism paradoxically discovers and propagates the conservative elements of the Protestant legacy,” stated Richter, “then is not Protestantism challenged for its part to represent the critical intention of the original Marxism?”⁶² The general secretary of the Protestant student congregations in the GDR, Jens Langer, suggested in an article in a church newspaper that the in the “Karl Marx Year,” the church should draw up its own “Theses on Karl Marx,” to parallel those of the state about Martin Luther.⁶³

Even before the Luther commemoration of November 1983, it seems that the patience of the SED politburo was at an end. On 23 October 1983, the politburo adopted a decision about future policy vis-a-vis the church, aiming at reducing the space for churches to question state policy, and at confining the role of the churches to “exclusively religious matters.”⁶⁴ According to Horst Dohle, then a senior official in the office of the state secretary for church affairs, “Opportunities that appeared possible, at least to a limited extent, in the context of the Luther commemoration for a new beginning in society and for the opening up, even if only cautiously, of GDR society, which was becoming increasingly fossilized, were squandered or deliberately destroyed.”⁶⁵

Conclusions

⁶² See Edelbert Richter, *Christentum und Demokratie in Deutschland: Beiträge zur gestigen Vorbereitung der Wende in der DDR* (Leipzig/Weimar: Kiepenheuer, 1991), 230.

⁶³ Maser, “*Mit Luther*,” 276.

⁶⁴ Horst Dohle, “Die Luther-Ehrung und die Kirchenpolitik der DDR,” in Dähn and Heise, eds, *Luther und die DDR*, 90.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

Reformation anniversaries “have always been indicators of the times in which they were celebrated,” writes Margot Kässmann. “In 1983 there was a kind of competition between East and West Germany over Luther’s legacy on the 500th anniversary of his birth. In the German Democratic Republic, Luther was no longer the lackey of princes but the representative of early bourgeois revolution.”⁶⁶ The 1983 Luther jubilee was certainly a contested commemoration, not only between East and West, but within the GDR – and within the SED itself. According to the Marxist historian Adolf Laube, while Honecker saw the Luther jubilee as being the high point of his political career, even if not all his wishes for 1983 were fulfilled, his political entourage included people who believed the churches were being given too much room for manoeuvre and who, by the beginning of 1984, became firmly convinced that the Luther commemoration was one of the greatest mistakes of the Honecker era.⁶⁷ According to Laube:

There are indications that suggest that from 1983 onwards there was serious criticism within the party and state leadership about the increased influence in society of the churches in the GDR, for which the Luther commemoration and Erich Honecker were held responsible. [Honecker] had fallen into the role of a sorcerer’s apprentice who was not able to rid himself of the spirits he had conjured up.⁶⁸

As such, the Luther commemoration offers an example of the GDR seen as a “contested dictatorship,” where “what looks from the outside like a rational, systematic process of policy initiation and delivery is often the outcome of heavily contested interests” existing “*among* key figures and institutions in the dictatorship, but not *against* the regime itself.”⁶⁹

Neither the GDR’s new approach to German history in general, or to Martin Luther in particular, succeeded in creating an all-embracing “sense of identity” of the population of the GDR with their putative “socialist homeland.” Moreover, the Luther commemoration of 1983 in the GDR had only limited success in consolidating the GDR’s international standing, and in incorporating Protestantism into the strengthening of the state at home and abroad. Instead, the

⁶⁶ Margot Kässmann, “Commemorating the Reformation in 2017,” *Ecumenical Review* 69:2 (July 2017), 145.

⁶⁷ “Interview with Adolf Laube,” 275.

⁶⁸ Martin Roy, *Luther in der DDR; Zum Wandel des Lutherbildes in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung* (Bochum: Winkler-Verlag, 2000), 273, cited in Maser, “Mit Luther” 421.

⁶⁹ Mike Dennis and Jonathan Grix, *Sport under Communism: behind the East German ‘Miracle’* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

Luther commemoration became a focus for the contested relationship of cooperation and competition between church and state that would continue throughout the 1980s, with church structures increasingly serving as a framework for challenging the state authority of the GDR, until the GDR itself was engulfed by what has been called a “Protestant Revolution” in 1989.

Stephen G. Brown

Editor, The Ecumenical Review

World Council of Churches

PO Box 2100

1211 Geneva 2

Email: sbo@wcc-coe.org